

Paul's Ecumenical Mission

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In this paper I will explore the material in the Pauline Epistles and the Book of Acts demonstrating Paul's ecumenical mission. First, I will examine the evidence that indicates his confinement in an introversive Jewish-centeredness, constituting the negative elements opposing the ecumenical orientation of Judaism and, by extension, of Paul's preaching. Then, I will take up the conversion of Saul, who, from persecutor of Christianity became a witness of the Gospel to the Gentiles, and joined in the task of spreading the message of salvation "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

For a clear treatment of the subject I shall divide this paper in three parts: in the first part I will briefly mention Paul's autobiographical references to his Jewish identity. In the second part I will trace his work as persecutor, an opposing element to the ecumenical mission. Finally, in the third part I will focus on Paul's call, which is the basis for his ecumenical mission. In this way I will try to give an answer to two fundamental questions:

a) Is Paul's ecumenical mission merely a natural development of the historical facts, as supported by those historians who use determinism as the only approach to historical issues? Or is it a matter which Paul, in his Epistles, and Luke, in the Book of Acts, wish to interpret in the light of the history of salvation?

b) Is it an event that can only be interpreted through polit-

ical, social and psychological facts or should the historical-theological facts be approached through a pneumatological perspective?

At the outset I must stress that the premise underlying my inquiry into Paul's ecumenical mission is the ecumenical mission of Jesus himself, of his disciples, and generally of the primitive Church, as well. This forms the historical-theological background of the treatment of my subject.

Paul's Jewish Descent

As Paul himself notes, he was a genuine Israelite, a Jew by birth and breeding, a descendant of Abraham (Rom 11:1). He was circumcised as an eight-day-old infant and he came from Benjamin's tribe: "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee" (Phil 3:5). Paul refers to his Jewish past, underlining both the external signs which prove his belonging to Israel, and his other Judaic prerogatives, such as circumcision on the eighth day, as mandated in the Law (Gen 17:12, 21:4; Lev 12:3). He came from the house of Israel (cf. Matt 10:6, 15:24; Acts 2:36), from God's own people, the people of the covenant. He uses the expression "Hebrew of Hebrews" for himself stressing that he not only descended from the stock of Israel, but also remained loyal to his people's traditions and manners (Phil 3:5; cf. 2 Cor 11:22). This fidelity gave him the right to boast of his more advanced development in Judaism than many of his compatriots: "I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal 1:14).

He knew both Hebrew and Greek, since he was born and brought up in the Diaspora. As far as the interpretation of the Law was concerned, he was a member of the Pharisees, which explains why he was distinguished for the strict keep-

ing of the letter of the Law: "as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil 3:6). To corroborate his status, he especially called for his compatriots to testify that he had lived according to the most rigorous principles of the Jewish religion: "They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee" (Acts 26:5).

Paul's autobiographical elements found in his Epistles are completed by information from the Book of Acts which states that he was a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia, citizen of a famous city (Acts 22:3), from a father who was a Roman citizen, and that is why he himself was a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:28).

Speaking to fellow Jews in his defense, Paul explicitly mentioned that he was a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia but brought up in Jerusalem. His teacher was Gamaliel, the famous teacher of the Law, who strictly taught him the Law of Moses, that of his forefathers. That is why he was zealous for God, as were all dedicated Jews (Acts 22:3). According to the apocryphal Acts of Barnabas, Paul in Jerusalem studied together with the Cypriot Levite Barnabas. This helps to explain Barnabas' intervention in presenting Saul the persecutor to the Apostles and the subsequent cooperation between the two in mission.

All these elements show that Paul was a fanatic zealot Jew, a condition which made it normal for him to seek to persecute the Christian Church to the death.

Paul's Jewish-Centeredness as Cause of His Work as Persecutor

In the Book of Acts, Luke introduces Paul at the moment of the stoning of Stephen, the First Martyr. The raging crowd dragged the Hellenist deacon outside the city and began throwing stones at him. The witnesses for the prosecu-

tion, who according to the Mosaic Law were to throw the fist stones, left their clothes at the feet of young Saul: "the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). Luke leaves no room for doubt about Saul's participation in the stoning as he immediately adds that Saul approved of Stephen's death: "And Saul was consenting to his death" (Acts 8:1). Commenting on this editorial intervention of Luke, St. John Chrysostom points out that it was made so that God's intervention in Paul's life could be demonstrated, followed by the conversion of the persecutor for the work of evangelization. Naturally, St. John Chrysostom stresses that at the point of stoning, Saul did not believe at all, but agreed and went along with the leaders of the stoning (PG 60:142).

According to the evidence of Acts, Saul did not limit himself to the event of Stephen's stoning and the approval of the death of the First Martyr. Saul himself started a work of persecution, which was the result of his religious and racial fanaticism rooted in the zeal for his ancestral traditions. He devastated the Church by breaking violently into houses and arresting men and women and putting them in prison: "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3; cf. Acts 22:4). Saul's dedication to the observance of the Law is the theological presupposition behind his work of persecution. The verb "διώκω" ("persecute") used by Paul (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:23; Acts 22:4) is characteristic of his conduct prior to his conversion. The deepest reason for which Paul persecuted the Church was his zealous commitment to the Jewish Law.

This attitude of Saul against the Christians is a landmark in his life which he does not fail to mention often in his Epistles. In the Epistle to the Galatians he refers to this persecution of the Church of God: "you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God

violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13).

Here we encounter a zealot Jew blinded by his commitment to ancestral tradition. His work of persecution against Christians had a deep theological content. There are no other reasons to which we can attribute this attitude of Saul towards the Church. His conviction was that the Law alone saves and not Christ. That is why it was quite natural for him to regard Stephen's speech (Acts 7:1-52) as a blasphemy against the Temple and the Law. This was also the reason why Saul started a relentless persecution against Christians. While he was bound to his ancestral traditions (Gal 1:14), he was functioning according to the Jewish exclusiveness based on the Law, not able to see in broader perspective the existence of an alternative option in Christ. The problem was soteriological: whether salvation could be obtained through the Law or through Christ. Saul was confined within the concept of salvation only through observance of the Law.

The Law was synonymous with Judaism. For him, rejection of the Law meant rejection of his own religion. That is why his reaction led him to the extremes of his acts of persecution. For Saul the Jew, the work of persecution was an act of faith and love, even towards the victims who, in his opinion, were misled by those who preached the Lord Jesus of Nazareth. Christians recognized Jesus as the Messiah announced by the prophets. For Saul, this was a misinterpretation of the prophetic message. Putting aside the Law amounted to religious and national treason. This was the theological foundation behind Saul's fanatical zeal, turning him into a defender of the ancestral tradition.

It becomes clear that through these historical facts and theological considerations it is not possible for anyone to imagine the idea of an "ecumenical mission of Paul." For one such as Saul the persecutor, everything begins and ends in the narrow frame of national exclusiveness. As such, there

was no opening into an ecumenical mission of Christianity. However, the human failure was given a solution by God himself in Paul's call to Christ and the proclamation of the gospel.

St. Paul's Ecumenical Mission Interwoven with His Call

In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul understands his call as something sudden, equivalent to the call of the prophets in the Old Testament. He has the sense that God had chosen him from his mother's womb and suddenly decided on the historical moment which he, God, judged as the most proper to call him to service: "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood" (Gal 1:15-16). Theophylactos of Ochrid, commenting on Paul's election, says characteristically: "And God had chosen him not because of his origin but because he knew in advance that he was worthy" (Ἀφώρισε δὲ αὐτὸν ὁ Θεός, οὐ κατὰ ἀποκλήρωσιν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ πρόγνωσιν τοῦ ἄξιον εἶναι, PG 124:964).

When God judged that the time was right to reveal his Son to Saul so that he would bring the joyful message of salvation to the Gentiles, the apostle did not depend on human power but simply gave himself up to God's grace. Consequently, Saul was chosen and marked out from his mother's womb for the work of the mission to Gentiles. In this way the ecumenicity of Paul's mission was predetermined by God's providence but it was manifested at a specific moment in the apostle's life.

It is characteristic that the period of Paul's life before his call not only fails to show any signs of an ecumenical missionary vision, but on the contrary testifies to the oppo-

site. As far as Saul the persecutor was concerned, historical and logical criteria absolutely precluded the possibility that Jewish exclusiveness could be transformed into an ecumenical mission to the Gentiles. It is obvious here that we cannot speak of development, but of God's call and the consecration of Saul to be the Apostle of the Gentiles. Paul writes of this himself in the Epistle to the Galatians, and Luke also reports the conversion and apostolic summons in the three parallel narratives in Acts (9:1-19, 22:6-21, 26:12-23). This is also a critical interpretive position of many eastern Fathers, including Theophylactos of Ochrid.

During his work of persecution, Saul exerted himself to the utmost. He went to the high priest and asked for recommendation letters to use in the synagogues of Damascus in order to bind and bring to Jerusalem any men or women who followed Christ (Acts 9:1-2). But under Paul's threatening murderous disposition lay hidden the mystery of his conversion from Judaism to Christianity and at the same time his ecumenical mission to the Gentiles. These are elements which go beyond historical determinism and rationalism and enter the field of theological interpretation of salvific history. In such events God is revealed as the Lord of history. This is the reality conveyed by Luke with his use of the word "suddenly" (Acts 9:3), which shows the power and immanence of divine intervention even in the lives and actions of human persons. Oikoumenios quite aptly remarks: "By presenting himself as persecutor previously and now suddenly converted, Paul intends to show that he could not be changed so quickly unless there had been some divine revelation to him" (Βούλεται ἐκ τοῦ δεῖξαι ἑαυτὸν πρότερον διώκτην καὶ νῦν ἐξαίφνης μεταβεβλημένον κατασκευάσαι, ὅτι μὴ θεία τις αὐτῷ ἀποκάλυψις ἐγεγόνει, οὐ ἄν οὕτω μετεβλήθη ταχέως. PG 118:1097).

In the first narrative of Paul's call (Acts 9:1-9), Luke presents the resurrected Christ as defining Saul's responsibilities.

After Saul's free acceptance of the call, Christ announces to a hesitant Ananias the new mission of Paul, which is none other than making the name of Jesus known to the Gentiles, to their rulers and the people of Israel. "Go," Christ says to Ananias, "for he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before the Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). This verse signifies a triple mission for Paul with three clearly ecumenical dimensions, and the three parallel narratives in Acts correspond to Paul's triple mission (9:1-19, 22:6-21, 26:12-23). The Church Fathers interpret Paul's mission as the mandate to spread the good news to the whole world: "He (Christ) says that he (Paul) will not only be a believer," Oikoumenios points out, "but a teacher and a preacher to the known world too, and he will also suffer a lot for me. That is why he says that I have chosen him and he will make my name known" (Οὐ μόνον πιστὸς ἔσται, φησίν, ἀλλὰ καὶ διδάσκαλος καὶ κήρυξ τῆς οἰκουμένης ἀλλὰ καὶ πείσεται πολλὰ ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ. Διὰ τοῦτο δέ φησιν ὅτι σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς μοί ἐστι καὶ ὅτι βαστάσαι τὸ ὄνομά μου (PG 118:169).

The mission begins with Jesus' announcement to Ananias. It is at this point that the persecutor becomes persecuted, the narrow minded Jew changes to a man who loves the entire world, the exclusiveness of the Jews turns into an ecumenical mission to the Gentiles. The choice of Christ or Law becomes a constitutive belief for salvation through Jesus Christ, the persecuted Lord who appeared to Saul and said: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5).

In First Corinthians, Paul himself considers his call as a consequence of the appearance of the resurrected Christ. He recounts it as the last appearance to the apostles: "The last of all he was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor 15:8-9). This fact later gave the right to Paul to defend

his apostolic office in the Epistle to the Galatians stressing that the Gospel he preached did not come from a man; he did not receive it from and he was not taught by a man, but "it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12). The Church Fathers support the fact that Paul learned the truth of the Gospel through revelation. Theophylactos stresses: "He is about to prove to them that he truly left the Law, that is why he mentions his previous way of living and his sudden conversion showing that he would not have suddenly been converted unless he had not been divinely informed. That is why he says, 'I did not receive it from any human being,' that is, I had no one as a teacher but I became a disciple of Christ himself" (Μέλλει δεῖξαι αὐτοῖς ὅτι μετέστη κατ' ἀλήθειαν ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο μέμνηται τοῦ προτέρου βίου καὶ τῆς ἀθρόας μεταβολῆς δεικνὺς ὅτι οὐκ ἂν μετέστη ἀθρόον, εἰ μὴ θειότεραν τινὰ πληροφορίαν ἔσχεν. Διὸ καὶ φησὶν ὅτι 'οὐκ ἔστι κατ' ἄνθρωπον τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου' τοὔτέστιν, οὐκ ἄνθρωπον ἔσχον διδάσκαλον, ἀλλ' αὐτοῦ τοῦ Χριστοῦ γέγονα μαθητῆς (PG 124:961).

The conversion of Saul the persecutor to "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God" (1 Cor 1:1) was followed, according to the evidence from Acts, by a new Pentecost. When Ananias arrived at the house where Paul was accommodated, he told him that he was sent by the Lord Jesus, the one who appeared to him on the road to Damascus. The purpose of his mission was to help him see: "that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17). Then at once something like scales fell from his eyes and he saw again. After that he stood up and was baptized (Acts 9:18).

Just as the apostles after Pentecost started preaching to those gathered "from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5), so also Paul, who was with the disciples in Damascus, from the very beginning preached in the synagogues that Jesus is

the Son of God (Acts 9:19-20). He testified to them that Jesus is the Messiah, that is, the Savior of all men and leader of the new people of God, of the Church (Acts 9:22). According to the theology of Acts, then, the descent of the Holy Spirit is the presupposition for mission. Mission is an outflow of the descent of the Holy Spirit.

The ecumenicity of Paul's mission is also stressed in the second narrative of Acts recounting his call and conversion to Christianity (22:6-21). Here we find a speech in his own defense over against his fellow Jews, in which he gives an account of his previous persecution of the Christians and of the transformative fact of his call. The central point of the narrative is that God chose Paul to know his will, to see Christ, and to hear his voice coming from his own mouth (Acts 22:14). With this experience, which corresponds to that of the apostles after the resurrection, Paul, too, becomes a witness to all of what he saw and heard. "For you will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:15). This ecumenical mission is also mandated by the order which Jesus gives to him while in a mystical vision at the Temple in Jerusalem: "Depart; for I will send you far away from here to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21). It is a mission which would be mainly directed to the Gentiles, that is, to the pagans who were distant to the true faith, the true worship and the revelation of the Son and Word of God, of the Messiah Jesus Christ.

All the above fall completely into line with the respective mission which the resurrected Lord assigned to the disciples and which is described by Luke at the beginning of Acts: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Quite clearly, the announcement is that the apostles will receive power from the descent of the Holy Spirit and will be witnesses for the resurrected Christ to all nations of the

known world. In the same way, Paul is sent to the Gentiles as the apostle of the resurrected Christ. That is why he is called at the proper time when the apostles' preaching had already started its course to the ends of the earth. The immediate cause was the persecution that broke out against the Church of Jerusalem where Saul had a major part. According to Paul's own admission, all the inhabitants of Palestine and the Diaspora also knew that he persecuted the Christians and even more, when Stephen's blood was shed, young Saul was there approving of the murder and guarding the clothes of those who stoned him (Acts 22:19-20). This knitting together of the drama and the tragedy, the persecution and the conversion, are elements that are integrated in the Book of Acts and which match salvation history and theology in the most harmonious way.

The third narrative in Acts recounting Paul's call has as the central point, as well, the ecumenicity of Paul's mission (26:12-23). After Jesus' revelation on the road to Damascus, Saul was ordered to serve Christ as a witness of what he saw and of what would be shown to him: "I will deliver you from the Jewish people as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I send you" (Acts 26:17). Paul's mission, at this point as well, was clearly ecumenical in character, which was confirmed by his address to king Agrippa. According to the narrative, the apostle began to preach at once in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and after that to the Gentiles in other places, urging all to repent and return to God: "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance" (Acts 26:19-20).

The ecumenicity of Paul's mission is clearly shown by an interpretative approach to the three parallel narratives of his call in Acts. His mission to the Gentiles is the fulfillment

of the charge that Jesus gave him on the road to Damascus. The same charge had previously been given to the other disciples, after Christ's resurrection. In this way Paul, too, is reckoned as an apostle: the ecumenical commission confers the role of apostle on Paul as it had on Jesus' other disciples. In other words, Paul's mission and its ecumenical objectives are not a new charge but an old one which Christ had previously given to the disciples and to the primitive Church.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the spirit of Paul's mission is not just a matter for academic research. Rather, it forms the basis, the foundation and the guideline for the ecumenical character of the Church's mission in the world. That is to say, the ecumenical spirit is a dynamic which impels a living Church to come to terms with the entire world, through ecumenical dialogues of an inter-orthodox, inter-confessional, and interreligious character. At the same time, such a Church must also contend with modern humanity as it is engaged in everyday idolatry, decay and death. This is the urgent significance of the ecumenical mission of Paul and of the Church.

Summary

I can summarize this paper with the following conclusions:

1. According to his autobiographical notes, Paul was indeed a strict Jew, who belonged to the class of the Pharisees. Of this Jewish identity he was especially proud prior to his call to Christ, in terms of his spiritual progress, which was more advanced than that of his fellow Jews, and of his exceeding zeal displayed by strict observance of the traditions of his ancestors. The evidence of the Epistles agrees with and completes that from the Acts concerning the life and personality of Saul.
2. Saul fanatically embraced the religion of the Mosaic

Law and this confined him to a Jewish introversion. His persistence in the ancestral faith and his conviction that salvation was accomplished only through the Law led him to persecute the Christians. His conscious participation in the stoning of Stephen and the systematic persecution against the primitive Church are elements that marked decisively his whole life and prevented him from taking the step towards freedom.

3. Saul encountered an acute dilemma: how the salvation of man is to be reached, through the Law or in Jesus Christ. The answer was revealed to him by his call on the road to Damascus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law. Salvation is accomplished in the crucified and resurrected Christ. This Christocentric soteriology led the ex-persecutor of the Church to become the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul's call was the presupposition for his ecumenical mission. In this way he was led from a Jewish introversion to an ecumenical mission, his conscious choice and blessed task to the end of his life.

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